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ABSTRACT

Reform of educational administrator preparation programs has received substantial attention from scholars over the past 15 years. Their works stress the importance of a strong knowledge base, problem-centered learning, and a renewed emphasis on affective development. A trend away from managerial, authoritarian leadership styles and toward empowering forms of leadership training linking theory and practice coincides with programmatic changes, including reduced emphasis on planning, facilities, buses, and budgets. Current principal candidates must be: skilled in school-based management; able to lead diverse student populations; sensitive to child development; effective instructional leaders;, capable of establishing a "community of learners"; and accomplished in reflective practices. The University of Southern Mississippi's Department of Educational Leadership initiated a major reform of its master's degree program to meet the state's revised standards, employing a cohort model emphasizing matriculation through group orientation. The new program features networks for present learning and future professional collaboration. The program directs professors to plan and deliver instructional programs as a team. Research indicates effective instructional leaders are people oriented, instructional resources for teachers, effective communicators, and highly visible. Students are required to formally interview three principals and share their comparative analysis of responses. This experience allows students to make the quantitative leap from theoretical constructs to real-world practice. (Contains 21 references.)(TEJ)

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Interviewing Practicing Administrators: An Underutilized Field Based Instructional Strategy

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Preparation programs for the training of future educational administrators have existed for a considerable period of time. However, the questions remain today as they have throughout the years, are such graduate programs specializing in the area of educational administration really preparing future school site administrators? Will they be able to assume their place within the field as functioning educational leaders? Will they be capable of not only leading teachers and others in delivering quality educational endeavors for students but also of functioning as true instructional leaders? In the early days of school leadership, principals tended to be selected from the ranks of teachers, who were thought to be transferable to the principal's office. Whether justified or not, in some instances local school policy makers, reflecting the values and mores of their communities, selected individuals who were perceived as exemplifying those same held values and mores to become school principals.

The call for change in preparation of future school leaders can be traced to such reports as the 1988 publication by the University Council for Educational Administration, Leaders for America's Schools (Griffiths, Stout & Forsyth). Drawing on the recommendations of earlier movements, this report raised important questions about educational administrators and their role in managing reform efforts in school improvement. Specifically, the report questioned, "...whether the preparation of future school leaders needs to be redesigned, and what the roles of federal, state, and local policy makers, teachers organizations, and particularly institutions of higher education should be in these changes" (Jacobson & Conway, 1990, p.x).

A decade has elapsed since the publication of Leaders for America's Schools (Griffiths et al., 1988) and as predicted, there has been no shortage of attention to the

reform of educational administrator preparation programs. For example, at least five professional associations have prepared full-length volumes expressing their policy statements regarding the preparation of school administrators (e.g. The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 1988; The National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1991; Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1992; The Council of Chief School Officers, 1996; The National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 1993). Indeed, three additional full-length volumes have been written on the general topic: Daresh and Playko proposed a career-long model for the education of school administrators. Murphy (1992) developed a philosophical basis for building preparation programs, and Jacobson and Conway (1990), in an edited work, presented views of a number of authors on the topic of administrator preparation.

A plethora of other scholarly works on the topic, preparation of educational administrators, also exists. In 1988, Daniel and Southerland offered a categorized view of 98 works spanning the period of time from 1988 to 1998. According to the Daniel-Southerland categorizations, readings ranged in themes from documentation of innovative practices to calls for radical and systemic changes in programs for preparing administrators. The extant scholarly works represented a collective wisdom on the topic of administrator preparation with focus placed upon the continuation of a strong knowledge base for administrator training, a heightened focus on problem-centered learning and a renewed emphasis upon the affective development of administrators.

What then should reformatted instructional programs at universities look like in order to effectively prepare future school principals to lead others in the quest for

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improved school environments that enable students to achieve their potential? According to Behar-Horenstein (1995) models of training programs at the university level are exhibiting a "movement away from the ...managerial, authoritarian, and top-down leadership styles that are typically associated with the science of administration" (p.18). Others agree (Lumdsen, 1993; Milstein, 1993; Thompson, 1991 & Thomson, 1992, 1993). Today, there is an observable transition toward collegial and empowering forms of leadership, which according to Behar-Horenstein (1995) has been catalyzed by a reconceptualization of the principal's role to such an extent as to seek congruence between theory and what happens in the "real-world"of school-based practice. Efforts to bring university programs into alignment with actual practice has been reflected by the development of group processing skills (Worner, 1994), participatory decision-making and consensus building skills (Thurston, Cleft, and Schacht, 1993), reflective thinking (Gordon and Moles, 1994), and monitoring of principal candidates and newly appointed principals (Grand, 1991; Stalenas, 1994; Snyder, 1994, and Worner, 1994).

Transitions in the professional preparation of future school principals have coincided with significant programmatic changes at many different levels. First, according to Behar-Horenstein (1995) "... many post-secondary educational administration programs previously accentuated planning, facilities, buses, and budgets. Second, newly reconstituted departments have been renamed as departments of educational leadership or educational leadership and policy" (p.19). Many of these newly configured programs have been designed to promote a "holistic" approach to preparing building principals. Such programs are attempting to train future principals

to have the skills and abilities to empower local schools and their publics to come together for the purpose of having a strong impact on student academic accomplishments (Heck, 1992; Krug, 1993; Rosenholtz, 1989). Current candidates for the principalship must be skilled in the school-based management model, which has significant implications relative to school principalship accountability, supervision, and efforts to improve student achievement. Further principals are expected to have the ability to voice and lead others to a vision of what effective schools look like. Additionally, principals must be able to function in disparate population settings. They must also possess the skills and abilities to provide leadership for teaching diverse age student populations, facilitating instructional change that accompanies inclusion efforts, and also be capable of overseeing the functioning of full-service school settings. To this list of expectations, Thurston et al. (1993) recommended that "...professional preparation programs should prepare leaders who are knowledgeable about child development and cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the social and academic aspects of schooling...they further suggested that prospective principals participation in administrative internships and work with stakeholders, including teachers, teacher educators, community leaders, and politicians who are engaged in school improvement efforts" (p.93). Additionally they also suggested that such individuals be skilled in writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and the ability to be understood by their audiences.

Finally, when exploring the concept of the principal as an instructional leader, Whitaker (1997) observed that a review of the literature on effective schools was abundantly clear in its contention that for such schools to exist it was necessary for

there to be an "effective principal". Accordingly, for such to be present, the principal has to be an individual that the instructional staff (teachers) looks to for leadership. This orientation of the principal as an instructional leader has been the focus of educational research for over twenty years, according to Whitaker. The research is clear on the fact that part of being an instructional leader is for the principal to be highly visible. Niece (1993) found three major themes within the review of the qualitative research on effective instructional leaders, namely that such individuals were: (1) people oriented and interactional, (2) able to function within a network of other principals, and (3) found to have administrative practitioners, who acted as mentors for them. To the previous findings, Smith and Andrews (1989) identified four additional areas of strategic interactions that were conducted by instructional leaders which led to higher student achievement levels and these were: (1) their being a resource provider, (2) their being an instructional resource, (3) their being a communicator, and finally, (4) their being a visible presence.

To the previous expectations add that as reported by Klotz and Daniel (1998), principals for the new millennium "...must be especially well-skilled in mobilizing teams of varied people and players to accomplish collaboratively the school's goals" (p.9). Furthermore, the "pluralism of students, staff, and community requires school leadership appreciative of and capable of working with others from diverse cultures, ethnicity's, and perspectives with particular understanding, sensitivity, and commitment to a concept of inclusively for meeting the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs of an increasingly diverse student and external population." Indeed, today's school leader must be committed to moral, ethical leadership that sets

the tone for establishing school as a "community of learners" (p.9) wherein mutual respect, trust, and concern for each other characterizes the climate and culture of school and community. To achieve this, the leader for the next millennium must be skilled in reflective practice earmarked by decision-making and problem-solving based on a well-examined belief system, i.e., an acquired, readily referenced core of values, which Steven Covey calls a state of "centeredness" that can guide one through difficult decision-making and crises.

Certainly, in establishing the expectation for graduate students in educational leadership preparation programs to spend time in the field engaging practicing school leaders in dialogue sessions aimed at gaining insight into their (the practicing administrator's) strategies, efforts, values, and beliefs relative to many of the afore mentioned expectations for administrators as espoused by various national reports and the substantial research literature available seems only prudent. To this end then, the concept of having students engage three practicing school principals each from a different level within the preK-12 setting, with at least one from a school involved in site-based management practices seems most advantageous for the student to see and reflect on theory to practice.

Thus, with the advent of the summer of 1999, the University of Southern Mississippi's Department of Educational Leadership (EDA) initiated a major redefinition of formatting its master's degree program. This action was undertaken to meet the Mississippi Department of Education's revised standards, as well as address the significant body of literature espousing change in such preparatory programs. Consequently the old format of stand alone, non-sequenced, course work was

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abandoned and in its place three, twelve credit hour integrated blocks of instruction, with an additional six-hour internship program was conceived and implemented. Within this course work, students moved through the instructional blocks entitled; Landscape of Leadership, The Principal as Instructional Leader, and The Principal as Manager.

This new program is built around a cohort model that emphasizes the matriculation of students via a group orientation. This is further augmented by assigned cohort instructor groupings. The intent has been two-fold. First, influencing a highly structured student orientation to networking both in the collaboration for present learning and for future collaboration and support in their careers. Second, the cohort process was expanded to include groupings of three to four professors who planned and delivered the instructional program as a team, thus eliminating the isolation and disjointedness of many traditional programs. Furthermore, the joint cohort configuration has permitted a conceptual integration of theory and application across and between courses so that issues are dealt with simultaneously. No longer must students wait for another course to see the missing pieces of the puzzle. This allows the student to recognize how concepts from different courses impact issues and/or projects which administrators deal with on a daily basis, a reality frequently not addressed in many traditional formats. An example of this integration concept was employed during Block 1 where students learned and applied the theory of leadership, decision making, motivation, and school board policy to reach solutions to multifaceted administrative issues. Other examples of teaching strategies employed included projects, leadership assessment inventories, interviews of practicing

administrators, interactions with visiting guest speakers, and finally, the development of individual student leadership platforms. To further aid students in their preparation efforts to become instructional leaders, an opportunity was created that allowed the students to gain insight into their leadership style(s) by taking a number of different assessment instruments specifically designed to provide each student with an analysis of their preferred leadership style or styles; thus giving each student analytical self-awareness into their tendencies toward leadership.

Students participated in various assessment inventories designed to identify their emerging styles of leadership and communication and their implications for their administrative behavior. This was further enhanced by a degree of expectation that each cohort member would develop an initial leadership platform, revising it periodically as his or her knowledge base expanded while moving through additional blocks. These skills were further developed as a series of guest speakers from education, business, government, and politics shared their career experiences with the cohort. In reflective activities following each presentation, students identified the speaker's leadership and communication styles. This activity was culminated with a group discussion comparing and contrasting the effects of each speaker's leadership and communication styles.

To function effectively as an instructional leader, research has indicated that certain skills and abilities are necessary. Those identified are; being people oriented, being capable of networking with others, being able to act as a resource provider, being a capable instructional resource to teachers, being a strong effective communicator, and being a highly visible administrator. The question to be answered

is how to facilitate the awareness of these skills while also allowing students to experience practicing administrators modeling these skills.

An optimal methodology to achieve these goals was to position students in a setting requiring them to formally interview three different building level principals, i.e., elementary, middle, and high school. Additionally to further enhance this learning opportunity, each student was expected to interview at least one administrator involved in site-based practices and at least one from either a private or parochial school. This was done to allow students to compare and contrast the styles and practices of administrators serving in different domains, public, private, or parochial. During the interviews, students questioned the principals on a wide array of administrative theories, practices, and issues, such as appropriateness of administrative span of control, perceived leadership style, areas of responsibility, supervisory practices, communication styles, utilization of technology, decision making strategies, and function of school board policy. Areas of interview emphasis were designed to facilitate students understanding and awareness of current best administrative practices in the different domains.

Following the field experience, students shared their comparative analysis of principal responses. These dialog interactive sessions permitted students to identify the different administrative styles and their impact on the organization and student achievement. Students were able to discuss the value of different administrative styles and practices utilized in the different school settings, i.e., elementary, middle, high school, private, parochial, public, and site based versus non site based. Examples of their observations are:

"I thought it was good that we had to interview principals from different levels and also that we had to include both site-based and nonsite-based administrators. I think we can learn a great deal from those individuals currently in the field of educational administration."

"The interviews were a vital tool in helping me understand the roles and thought processes of a building administrator."

"Interviewing three distinctly different principals provided my first insight into the realm of - perception versus reality. This activity was very helpful in stimulating subsequent discussions within the cohort. It was definitely meaningful and relevant to each of us and has become a terrific reference tool."

"The required interviews of site-based versus non-site based, elementary, middle, and high school principals, gave me the opportunity to know the difference between site based functions and non site based functions."

"This activity was of great educational value. One change I would make is to interview principals with varying years of experience. The advice given and comments made will not be forgotten. I believe this activity should be required of all future cohorts."

"The principal interviews gave me the opportunity to talk with administrators and get a perspective of how things should and should not be done in a school. Being able to go in and look at different schools, talk with principals of different backgrounds and experiences, gave me insights

as to reasons why schools do and do not succeed."

"The interviews allowed me to cement my own theories of administration and to understand different leadership styles and how they work for the man-in-the-job."

BENEFITS OF THE EXPERIENCE: Aside from the direct interaction between preservice administrative student and practicing administrator, what benefits are associated with this learning experience? The answer lies in the ability of the instructor(s) to continuously structure within the classroom setting, revisiting and reflecting on the outcomes and analyses of these interviews.

This quality was noted during subsequent class settings, as students were exposed to new knowledge, the interviews were continuously revisited in order to activate the student's transition from theoretical models to real world practice. In reality, instructors were not required to insert "war stories" to bring home a point. Now it was possible to ask the question "Give an example of how this theory can be or is applied in a real world environment". Because of the stored knowledge of the interview experience, students were able to make the quantitative leap from theoretical construct to real world practice. This tool, i.e. principal interviews, sharpened the retention of theoretical knowledge through direct association with what principals are doing in the field.

This activity provided a platform for students to engage in distributed practice throughout the block, a strategy well known for reinforcing deeper meaning and knowledge. By constantly returning to the interview experience, students were encouraged to acquire the linkage between the concepts taught in class and how they

were applied in the field. There in lies the value of this instructional practice, the constant reiteration of real world application. Now students leave a program with more than abstract knowledge, but the ability to apply practices and procedures, which will have a positive impact on student achievement.

If nothing else, other professors of educational leadership should look to this concept of multiple on site interviews of practicing administrators as a valuable asset for the training and development of future administrators. This strategy can be used in a multiplicity of courses with modification to meet the specific focus of the content. As an example, adaptation of the strategy is certainly applicable for such courses as Instructional Supervision, Public School Finance, and/or School Community Relations.

How then does the instructional strategy of structured interviews of practicing school principals blend with and support the established expectations for the preparation and training of future Mississippi school-site administrators? The answer to this question can be found in Appendix A, "MISSISSIPPI ADMINISTRATOR STANDARDS ". This table identifies specific standards from the state oriented skill expectations that this specific instructional practice meets.

MISSISSIPPI ADMINISTRATOR STANDARDS AND INDICATORS:

Standard I: Maximizes student learning by working with staff to translate knowledge of learning theory and human development and relevant school data into successful curricular programs, instructional practices, and assessment strategies.

9. understands relevant models of supervision
12. is committed to excellence
13. is committed to high expectations of self and others
14. believes that decisions should be made in the best interest of children
21. sets, communicates, and monitors high expectations for faculty and staff
22. nutures the development of a shared school vision and mission
27. encourages risk-taking and is receptive to change

Standard II: Applies human relations and interpersonal skills to foster a climate of continuous learning and improvement.

51. understands theories of human relations
52. knowledge of leadership theories and styles
53. understands motivational theories and strategies
55. knowledge of human relations skills (conflict resolution, group processes, decision making, team building, delegation, consensus building, providing
57. values diversity
61. values group or team approach

Standard IV: Exhibits team building skills in the development of ownership among all stakeholders in the school community.

130. knows key stakeholders and what they can contribute
135. values the worth of all people
136. values the opinions of others
138. believes that everyone has talents and strengths that he/she can contribute to the common good
142. is willing to share power, ownership, and credit
143. values team concept
154. uses knowledge, competencies, and experiences of stakeholders in the service of school goals

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